

Aki

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Summary: A girl who doesn't feel useful with anything but the sword decides to join the Shinsengumi to find completeness in her life.

Interactions with Hakuoki characters, the main characters are original characters.

Aki

Her name was Aki.

While she was seemingly just an ordinary Japanese girl, but she did not really fit with what she always assumed was her place. She wasn't very good at the usual womanly things and felt limited by them. She was only truly happy when she was practicing her sword technique. Her family had insisted on her being able to defend herself, and the more she learned the more she enjoyed it. It soon became the only thing that kept her going, because she knew that there would always be time for her to practice if she did her other chores.

One day, she decided she had had enough of hiding. She wanted to use her abilities to their highest potential and she didn't want to waste her time doing the things she didn't like doing anymore. She knew of one way that she could do this; if she joined the Shinsengumi. She knew that by doing this, she would be able to further improve and also put her skills to use. It would also be a way for her to contribute to society and make her mark, if only just a little.

So she dressed herself in boys' clothing. She cut off some of her hair, the only way she knew to alter her appearance, but still left it so that it would go past her shoulders. She pulled it to the back of her head, leaving out a few short strands that weren't long enough to fit, which parted in the centre of her face and fell down either side. She sheathed her sword, stuck it under her sash and left her home quietly in the night, leaving no traces of where she was going.

She arrived at Shinsengumi headquarters by mid-morning. After a few

moments she was approached by Vice Commander Toshizo Hijikata.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

"I would like to join the Shinsengumi," Aki replied confidently. She was not afraid of him knowing she was a girl; she had a rough voice as boyish features.

"Join the Shinsengumi?" Hijikata was a little surprised and responded sternly. "You're only a boy. Go home. We need skilled warriors, not children who think they are more than they are." He started to turn around and go back inside, but Aki hadn't given up yet.

"I know how to use a sword!" Aki shouted. "I have trained for years, and my master has told me that I am quite skilled. It is the thing I am best at! I know I'll be of use to you!"

"Fine," Hijikata sighed, annoyed. He saw the spunk in her eyes and heard the toughness in her voice, but was not yet convinced. "I'll let you show us your skill. What's your name, boy?"

"My name is Aki Toyama."

"Well, then, _Toyama_; come with me, we'll see how strong you prove to be."

She followed him, a little excited that she had made it this far and a bit nervous, but still confident.

Hijikata walked up to one of the doors in the compound.

"Saito. Can you come out to the courtyard?"

A few moments later, a young man appeared from behind the door. Aki could only see one of his eyes, as the other was covered by his hair, but she could feel him looking her up and down, assessing her.

"Yes, Hijikata-san," Saito replied. His voice quiet, but it was strong.

The two men led her out to the middle of the courtyard. The one called Saito faced Aki. She noticed the unusual placement of his swords.

"They're on the right sideâ€¦" she murmured.

"Yes," Saito quickly replied, having heard her. "But this makes me no less a warrior than the others."

"I'm sorry," Aki replied, bowing. "I did not mean to offend you. I was merely remarking what I saw."

Saito said nothing in reply.

"You may start whenever you wish," Hijikata said.

Saito drew his sword as soon as Hijikata finished his sentence. Aki didn't hesitate, and quickly had hers drawn as well and blocking Saito's blade. She blocked his next moves with ease; these were the exact ones she had practiced with her teacher so many times. Quickly,

Saito started more intricate movements, which Aki also reacted quickly to. After a while she became a little less quick as things became more difficult, but she didn't give up. She kept her movements confident and made sure not to panic. It ended when he finally made it in, holding his blade to her throat.

I lost.

Saito sheathed his sword. When Aki looked around, she saw that more members of the Shinsengumi had gathered around and had been watching her spar with Saito. She could feel their eyes staring at her, making her feel uneasy.

"Alright, then," Hijikata said after a few moments. "What do you think, Kondo-san?" He turned to a man who was a bit older with a topknot at the back of his head.

"I think this young boy shows a lot of promise. He is very skilled for someone his age," Kondo replied.

"I agree, but he still needs improvement. We'll have to have him learn more techniques, and have him refine them."

"I couldn't have said it better myself. And you'll teach him, right, Saito-kun?"

"Yes," Saito responded briefly.

Aki bowed.

"Thank you very much! I promise I won't let you down! I'll do my best!"

"We'll assign you to Heisuke's unit," Hijikata said. "Follow his commands when we are in battle. And I'm sure you already know that you must follow the Bushido and all of our other regulations."

"Yes."

"Looks like you've got another unit member, Heisuke!" said one of the men, who wore a scarf tied around his head, as he grabbed another one of the men in a headlock. "You got the rookie."

"Stop it, Shinatsu!" the other replied, trying to pull out of the hold. He stumbled a bit when he was finally released.

"You know," the one named Kondo said with a bit of a chuckle. "I noticed that this boy looks kind of like Toshi when he was younger."

"Eh?" Hijikata looked slightly embarrassed and confused. "Are you sure about that, Kondo-san?"

"It's not too much of a resemblance, but it's there."

Aki, surprised, glanced back at Hijikata, wondering how she could look anything like the strong Vice Commander.

"Chizuru, go get this boy settled in a room," Hijikata finally said,

regaining a hold of himself.

"Yes, Hijikata-san."

A girl appeared from the crowd of men. Aki noticed that she was wearing boys' clothes as well, but she didn't seem to be hiding the fact that she was a girl from the Shinsengumi. Aki followed the girl until she slid open one of the doors.

"You can stay in here," the girl said. "I'm sorry. May I ask your name?"

"Aki Toyama."

"I hope you are glad you joined the Shinsengumi, Toyama-san," the girl replied. "They can take a bit of getting used to, but they're good people. My name is Chizuru Yukimura. I help with the chores around here."

"Yukimura-san; since you've been here a while, could you tell me which one of them is Heisuke Todou? I'd like to know my unit leader."

"Heisuke-kun is the one who looks the youngest, and he's kind of short. He has really long hair, too."

"Oh, the one who was being picked on by one of the others?"

Chizuru laughed. "Yes, that's Heisuke-kun! Nagakura-san likes to tease him quite a bit."

Aki was very tired that night, but before she fell asleep, she thought about how much had happened that day. There were so many people whose names she had to remember, and so many things to do. She had to make sure she could get even better at fighting than she already was. But even though she knew it wasn't going to be easy, she felt happy. She had actually started what she hoped would be fulfilling in her life. She would be able to put into practice the thing she liked doing best.

The next morning, she awoke for a lesson with Saito, who often would teach other members in the way of the sword.

The way he would teach the moves and correct her mistakes, it made her former master, whom she always thought was amazing, seem very basic and not nearly as skilled. Saito was just so much better. She supposed that could be expected of a samurai. By the end her hands shook, but she felt so good about all the new things she was learning and how much better she knew she was going to become.

When she was deemed ready, she started to go on patrols with other members of the Shinsengumi, specifically those of Heisuke's unit. There was something about the way that some of the people would look at them as they would go by â€" slightly in fear â€" that made her feel a bit uneasy. She didn't want them to fear her and the others. She wanted them to be grateful of their work to protect them. This feeling soon vanished however, when she remembered that this was the happiest way she could spend her life, and no matter what some people thought, she was making a contribution to their world.

Time passed, as did the Ikedaya Incident. Her body vibrated with electric feelings as she put on the blue coat for her first battle. It wasn't the same as when she would go out on patrol. It was on a whole other level; it really made her feel like she was a part of something meaningful.

Aki could hear the clashing of swords all around her in the inn, including her own against her opponent's. It was the hardest she had ever fought, for she had to protect her life as well as others. She could hear herself grunting with the effort of her blocks and attacks, as well as the few times that her opponent was able to hit her, making shallow cuts into her body. It was a hard fight, but she didn't let her opponent see her back. She finally found a hole in his stance and defeated him.

She looked to the right, where she noticed another member of the Shinsengumi. He had been fighting alongside of her the whole night, and he was still nearby, fighting his own opponent. Aki was soon attacked by another person, given no time to catch her breath. She defeated him just moments before the battle ended.

When they were commanded to leave, Aki noticed the man who had been fighting nearby look over and give her a small nod. She returned the nod.

She wasn't very instrumental in this victory for the Shinsengumi, but she still felt she had made a contribution. With some of the members of her unit, she celebrated this battle while the higher-ups had their own celebration.

"We kept Kyoto from burning down!" one of them said happily, raising his sake.

"Long live the Shinsengumi!" another one said before taking a gulp.

"Hey â€" it's Toyama-san, right â€" you haven't had any sake yet. Are you feeling alright?"

"Oh, sorry," Aki turned towards the voice that had sounded somewhat concerned, and she realized it was the same man who had been fighting alongside of her during the battle at the inn.

"Here," the young man said as he passed her one of the small cups. "You should be able to celebrate, too. You just haven't gotten any yet, right?"

"Uh, yeah. Thanksâ€|" Aki didn't want to admit that she hadn't drunk sake before. It might even give away her true identity.

"Aren't you going to drink it?" he asked her.

I guess I might as well try it, Aki thought. She raised it to her lips and took a small sip. She could feel it going to her head, and she didn't much like the taste of it, either.

"If you don't like, that's alright, you know," he replied with a bit of a chuckle. "By the way, you can call me Yuuji."

"Yuujiâ€|" Aki replied hesitantly. This was the first time someone in

the Shinsengumi had asked to be referred by their first name. She had always spoken to everyone respectfully. "I guess you can call me Aki"

"So, why did you join the Shinsengumi, Aki?" he asked abruptly.

"Huh?"

"Yeah. You must have a reason, since the Shinsengumi is a pretty big deal."

Aki wasn't sure how to respond. How could she do it without giving herself away?

"Alright, I'll tell you mine first," Yuuji started when Aki didn't answer, passion rising in his voice as he went along. "It was a few years ago now. I was only a boy then, by comparison. My older brother was attacked and killed by a couple rogue samurai in the city. He had been the one who taught me everything, he had even been the one to show me the art of the sword, and I was devastated. I wondered where those who were supposed to save him were supposed to be, the ones who were supposed to stop criminals like that. I realized it was the Shinsengumi. They were supposed to help and protect the people of Kyoto. I joined because I wanted to help and so that there would be more people on the citizens' side, so that hopefully fewer people would end up killed like my brother."

"Wow," Aki said. "That's awful! I'm so sorry you had to lose your brother like that."

"Yeah"

"So," he said again. "I've told you my story. What's yours?"

"Um, well" _How do I put this?_ "I joined because the sword is my favourite thing in the world"

"Really?" Yuuji asked, interested. "How so?"

"Well, you see," Aki started. "I was never that great at anything else, and I never really enjoyed anything else. My family wanted me to learn how to use a sword, just so that I could protect myself, but as I trained I started to enjoy it more and more. I get an amazing feeling every time I practice, and even every time I fight. I can't describe it, but it's the best feeling I've ever had. I feel powerful, and strong, and useful! I would do all my chores, but they were never anything like practicing with my sword. I joined the Shinsengumi hoping that I could be truly happy and spend my life on the thing I love the most."

Yuuji could see the passion in her eyes as she told her story, and he found it amazing.

"I guess this means a lot to you then, doesn't it?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'd say it does. I think everyone here is pretty cool, and they're all so strong. I hope to one day be as strong as everyone else."

"I saw you fighting at Ikedaya. You already seem very strong. You fought really hard back there. Plus, you came out of it with only a few scratches."

"Well, I'd say they're more than scratches. I still had to bandage myself up a bit."

"Bandage yourself up?"

"Yeah. These wounds weren't worth getting checked out. They're just shallow cuts."

She couldn't tell him it was to hide her gender from the other members, who would surely see that she wasn't a boy when they would go to bandage her body.

"Oh, I see. 'Leave the doctoring to the truly wounded,' right?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

They talked on and on until the others made their way to their beds. It was one of the first real conversations she had had in a while since she had been so focused on training and her duties in the Shinsengumi.

Slowly, the two of them became very close. After some time they were always seen together around Shinsengumi headquarters. They would train together, eat together, patrol together; to some it seemed that they did all but sleep together. If you saw one of them by themselves, chances were the other was not far away. As various battles happened, Aki and Yuuji always stayed close together, covering each other's backs if need be. It was in one of these battles that Aki got more severely wounded than she ever had.

At first it all seemed normal. Fighting wasn't always easy, but a challenging fight was what Aki expected on the battlefield. But soon she started having trouble fighting this particularly difficult opponent. It became harder and harder to block, and she soon was forced onto defense, not being able to attack. Her movements became larger, the two blades clashing loudly against each other. She grunted with effort with each swing, her jaw tightly clenched.

And then she was hurt. Her opponent's blade slashed through her side and across her stomach, leaving a deep wound that quickly stained her blue coat red with blood. She yelled with pain, but kept fighting. She couldn't lose. She couldn't lose. She had to win for the sake of Kyoto and this land she called home. She couldn't stop now, even when she found it hard to stand. These same thoughts repeated in her mind over and over. For the first time, she was truly afraid she would die.

Yuuji, nearby as always, saw her defeat her opponent before falling to her knees.

"Aki!" he cried. He slashed the man he was fighting, sending him to the ground. Yuuji ran to Aki and scooped her up before darting away into the bushes far from the battlefield.

I probably shouldn't be doing this, but I can't watch my friend die, he thought.

"Yuuji" he heard Aki mumble.

"I've got you, Aki," he said to her. "I'm not going to let you die."

He finally set her down near a shady tree. From here, the sounds of the battle, though still very present, were muted. He figured they'd be safe there.

"I've got to stop the bleeding," Yuuji murmured to himself. He loosened her sash and opened her kimono, searching for the wound.

"Huh?"

He saw what he didn't expect to see, but now he fully understood his feelings for Aki. It wasn't only because she was his friend, but also because she was a woman. His love for her was more than just a close friendship.

"I'm sorry, Yuuji," Aki said weakly, looking up at him and knowing that he had discovered her secret. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I had to lie to everyone to get here."

Yuuji didn't waste any time. He tore a strip of cloth off of his own clothing and applied pressure to her wound. Blood still seeped through. He tried again, this time tying it tightly around her body where she had been cut.

"Ugh..." He heard her wince.

"This is the only way to stop it," he said, trying to comfort her. "You're going to have to bear the pain."

They stayed there for a long while. After the bleeding had slowed, Aki started to regain her strength, though she still felt weak.

"I think I can walk now," she said.

"Alright," Yuuji said. "Just take it slow. I can help you walk if you need me."

"Thank you, Yuuji."

Aki fixed her clothes and put her sheathed sword back under her sash. Even though she had said she was fine, she shook as Yuuji guided her every step. She felt like she was walking forever, but they made it back to the rest of the Shinsengumi troops and went with them back to base.

Aki spent the next weeks resting. Yuuji had volunteered and convinced the others that he would tend to Aki's wounds, and came to change her bandages and keep her company during the day. Chizuru also brought her meals and would talk to her for a while.

"What happened to you, Toyama-san?" she asked on the first day. "I heard from the others that you were hurt quite badly and they had to

bandage you up."

"I was fighting and I got a deep wound across my body," Aki replied, trying to have composure around Chizuru. "It was quite painful, and I was bleeding a lot, but I'll be fine."

The tea that Chizuru brought her was always the right temperature, warming her insides, and the food was always just right. It eased her feelings of shock and weakness, even if only for a little while.

Then one day, to Aki's surprise, Kondo came to visit her.

"Kondo-san! Commander!" she said in awe as he came into her small room, doing the best she could to bow for him. She was embarrassed meeting him in this setting, not dressed in very much, lying on the tatami and her hair undone.

"No need to be so formal," Kondo said to her at her reaction to his presence. "I'm just here to thank you."

"Thank me?"

"Yes." Kondo continued calmly. "This isn't something I usually do, but I felt that I needed to thank you for risking your life back there. You fought gallantly and without stopping, even when you were hurt. I heard from some of the other soldiers. You may be young, but you are a true member of the Shinsengumi. A true samurai."

Aki was too surprised to think of something to say. Was she supposed to thank him? That didn't seem right since he was thanking her.

"Thank you for serving under the Shinsengumi, Little Toshi," was the last thing Kondo said before leaving.

Even with the visits from Chizuru and the one visit from Kondo, Yuuji was the still one who visited her the most, and because he was the only one who knew her secret, he changed her bandages. Although the other members of the Shinsengumi didn't know the real reason why.

He sat with her, holding her close. Sometimes she simply laid her head in his lap, other times she sat up so that he could wrap his arms around her.

"I was so scared, Yuuji," she sobbed through her tears, onto Yuuji's shoulder. "I was so scaredâ€¦I thought I was going to die!"

"It's alright now," Yuuji said quietly, stroking her hair. "You're going to be fine. You're safe now. I'm right here."

"I was so scaredâ€¦"

"I know, but it's alright."

He stayed with her until she calmed down and left when he had to go. Sometimes she fell asleep in his arms, and he crept out quietly as not to wake her up again.

For many nights, Aki had nightmares of that moment; of the blade slicing through her skin and being sure she was going to die. It was the most frightening thing that had happened in her entire life, and it wouldn't leave her mind.

"You fight so well," Yuuji told her on one of the last days of her healing, her fear still overcoming her. "I'm sure your efforts are much appreciated, Aki."

Aki remembered how much she had wanted to contribute to Kyoto, how much she wanted to do what she liked to do—to fight. In her shock she had forgotten that, and when Yuuji reminded her it took away some of the pain.

"You're so skilled, you're strong, and you're beautiful," Yuuji continued. "That's why I love you, Aki."

And then his lips were on hers. He held one hand gently against her back, and with the other he grasped her hand. Aki closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the man she had come to love; the man she had met in celebration of battle and the man who had saved her in battle. The man who shared the same dedication for the sword and she, the man who fought hard for what he believed was right, and the man who stayed by her side when she needed him. She had come to the Shinsengumi to make the most of her life, to have everything she wanted. It not only made use of her talents, but it brought her to Yuuji as well. It had brought more completeness to her life than she had ever expected.

End
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